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Gila panel votes 'no' again on freeway

Betty Beard

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For the second time in two weeks, a Gila River Indian Community committee has said "no" to the idea of even studying a proposal to build the South Mountain Freeway on reservation land.

Barring a grass-roots referendum, the unanimous vote Wednesday by the tribe's three-member Government and Management Standing Committee likely kills the possibility for the freeway to be built on Indian land.

The vote came without comment by members.

Gila Gov. William Rhodes was pushing for a public vote on a study that could help decide whether the freeway should be built on reservation land, potentially saving hundreds of Ahwatukee Foothills homes now in the roadway's path.

"This is strictly from the governor's offices," said Rene Peters, a Gila River citizen who attended Wednesday's meeting and owns land on the reservation where the freeway could have been built.

"These people said what the Legislative (Standing) Committee did before, but maybe not as boldly: No is no. I hope the administration takes heed."

Either committee could have forwarded the governor's proposal to the full council for consideration. Since neither did, only a grass-roots referendum with 10 percent of eligible voters signing a petition would put the issue on the ballot.

Tribal attorney Jason Hauter, representing the governor at the meeting, emphasized that the vote was only for a possible study of the freeway, not actual construction.

"The governor thinks it is a huge issue. It's bigger than District 6 because of the economic impact," he said.

District 6 is the area of reservation where the freeway would have gone through.

The proposed freeway is currently planned to run from Interstate 10 along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee Foothills to a yet-to-be-determined point on I-10 in the West Valley. It would demolish hundreds of Ahwatukee Foothills homes.

Peters, who lives in District 6, said he understands Ahwatukee Foothills residents' angst over the proposed freeway. Most District 6 property is owned by individuals - not the tribe - and they don't want to lose their land to a freeway either, he said.

Rhodes, who has been the governor about five months, had an uphill battle from the start with his referendum proposal. A 2001 resolution adopted by the Gila River Community Council forbids the freeway or even a study of it. The council reaffirmed that stance about a year ago.

The Legislative Standing Committee voted April 26 to take the governor's proposal off the agenda after hearing from several community members opposed to building the freeway on the reservation.